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Fashion and East Asia: Cultural translations and East Asian perspectives

Introduction

Fashion speaks to communities across borders, involving interlingual processes and translations across cultures, media, and industrial and commercial sectors. This special issue explores East Asian fashion as a multifaceted process of cultural translation. Contributions to this special issue are drawn from the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded network project, ‘Fashion and Translation: Britain, Japan, China, Korea’ (2014–15),¹ and the following articles investigate the role of clothing fashion as a powerful and pervasive cultural intermediary within East Asia as well as between East Asian and European cultures. Thinking about East Asia through transnational fashion allows us to analyse creative and cultural distinctiveness in relation to imitation, transformation and exchange, and to look for dialogues, rather than oppositions, between the global and the local. This approach is not only useful but also essential in a world that has been connected by textile trading networks for millennia, and yet feels increasingly characterized by the transnational and by globalized communication. As Sam Maher has asserted, ‘[f]ew industries weave together the lives of people from all corners of the globe to quite the extent that the textile and garment industries do’ (2015–16: 11). The planet is connected through

everyday clothing choices, and for millions of people the industry also provides their livelihood.

In her discussion of transcultural art, Julie Codell emphasizes that borders ‘are permeable and liminal, not restrictive spaces’, and that we can see in the production, consumption and reception of transcultural art the coexistence of diverse cultures expressed in ambiguous, discontinuous or new ways (2012: 7). Fashionable clothing can be designed in one hemisphere, manufactured in another, and retailed and consumed globally while maintaining a brand identity that is attached to one nation. Internet shopping and fashion blogging further call into question the way in which national boundaries function in relation to globalization and cosmopolitanism, and their companion forces of localization and ethnocentrism (Appadurai 1996; Appadurai 2001; Hannerz 1996). After all, the transnational’s non-identical twin, created *in utero*, is the national. Therefore, while fashion crosses and confounds geographical boundaries in a myriad of ways, national and regional identities remain central to the dynamics of fashionable dress as cultural expression, economic strategy and international politics, and cultural borders are in a continuous state of being drawn and dissolved. For example, in 2012 Tokyo Fashion Week hosted the first Japanese Tweed Run, a bicycling event that celebrates nostalgic notions of British eccentricity through the motif of traditional tweed (Tweed Run 2017 Tweed Run Tokyo 2012). Meanwhile, in Britain, the BBC was ‘accused of betraying Scotland – and the Western Isles’ when it dressed its hero from the prime-time television drama *Doctor Who* (1963 to present) in an acrylic-mix fake Harris Tweed jacket manufactured in China (Hebrides News 2011).

Hybrid objects play an important role as a multidirectional means of cultural transmission (Bhabha [1985] 1994; Guth 2015). By focusing on fashion as a complex

state of the culturally in-between – between East Asian nations, and between East Asia and other regions of the world – the ‘Fashion and Translation’ network project actively privileged the culturally confusing as a crucial site for increased understanding of fashion and global flow. Translation is an intercultural process through which the foreign is made meaningful and the exotic can become domesticated. Examining fashion practices, objects and images can reveal specific moments in the translation process and provide a means of working with national and regional identities within a more global framework. Questioning and making indistinct, for example, the otherwise absolute status of the *qipao* as a symbol of China, or revealing the many interconnections between Korean fashion practices, twentieth-century Japanese rule and the global fashion industry, enables important interventions in the study of fashion and globalization through a focus on material objects and fashion practices in cultural translation.

The range of symbolic and material modalities across which fashion acts, coupled with fashion’s intimate association with the body and the individual self within society, certainly makes fashion an incredibly potent subject for the examination of regional and nation identities. On the surface, the juxtapositions and contradictions inherent in the transnationalism of fashion appear as a clash of forces and ideologies, propelled by various interest groups, economic models and political imperatives. The roots of these ‘clashes’, however, as they are experienced in fashion cultures today, seem to lie in the conditions of identity formation and the building of modern nation states in the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperialism, industrialization and capitalism. The ways in which East Asian fashion can be conceptualized, as well as the variety of forms it has taken, are thus inseparable from nineteenth- and twentieth-century histories of regional and global interaction. In

considering how the ‘clashes’ come about it is clear that, far from being antithetical, the national and the transnational are utterly co-dependent. The question is not ‘How can fashion be an agent of both the national and the transnational?’ or ‘In what ways do East Asian fashions conflict with western fashion?’, so much as ‘How does the movement of fashion across cultures relate to the production of East Asian identities?’

East Asia and fashion identities

Fashion cultures often rely on cultural differences between ‘East’ and ‘West’ to produce value and newness, using the ‘exotic’ as a reliable source of design novelty and material luxury. Part and parcel of the cultural appropriation of which the fashion industry is frequently charged, orientalism in fashion has been explored in exhibitions such as *China: Through the Looking Glass* (New York, 2015) and the Kyoto Costume Institute’s *Japonism in Fashion* touring exhibition (Kyoto, Paris and Tokyo, 1996; Los Angeles, 1998; New York, 1999). However, many instances of the commodification of East Asian ethnic difference are so complex, so everyday, and so embedded in the transnationalism of the fashion world that they defy the binaries of an orientalist framing. The Japanese brand UNIQLO has over 1300 stores in fifteen countries throughout Asia, Europe and the United States. This high street ubiquity is underscored by the brand’s identity as a source of clothing basics for all human bodies everywhere (‘lifewear’), laying claim to a universal cultural neutrality. At the same time, UNIQLO also promotes the idea of innovative Japanese fibre technology (Heat Tech) and its visual branding incorporates Japanese writing, so that the universal is also very Japanese.

Conversely, the Chinese high street brand Bosideng, famous within China for its down-filled outerwear, began a limited experiment in European and US expansion

with the establishment of a London store in 2012 (Booker 2012), and a pop-up store in New York in 2014. Though known for its mid-range utility in China, the items sold in London were more up-market and included ‘Chinese cuts’, supplying local consumers with something more recognizably Chinese, while the New York pop-up store purported to bring a ‘Chinese sensibility’ to its menswear, partly by using Chinese characters prominently in the store (Fashion United 2014; Jing Daily 2014). Analysis suggests, however, that this international expansion had not been aimed at creating a market for Bosideng abroad, but was part of a corporate strategy to build brand credibility among wealthy Chinese consumers through a physical presence alongside luxury European fashion in key fashion-tourism cities (Lin and Chan 2013). The question of who is appropriating what, and to what purpose, is ripe for debate.

Fashion design and production centres have been shifting, changing ‘not only the geography of fashion, but also the relations between “made in” and national creativity’ (Segre Reinach 2011: 268). These changes, however, occur in constant tension with particular hierarchies between fashion capitals and manufacturing regions and within fashion scholarship. Beyond issues of self-orientalism and appropriation (Niessen 2003; Kondo 1997), to understand the buying and selling of East Asian identities through fashion necessitates a careful weighing up of what constitutes the exotic and what constitutes fashion at any given time and place. Crucial to this endeavour is to take into account a view from within East Asia.

The last two decades have seen a sea change in fashion studies. The influence of postcolonial studies has brought about a radical shift in the way in which ‘fashion’ is conceptualized in anglophone academic discourse and has exposed the legacies of racist and colonial power relationships. In particular, approaches from within anthropology have enabled the conceptualization of multiple fashion systems and

non-western fashion subjectivities (Baizerman et al. 2008; Craik 1993; Jansen and Craik 2016). This has exposed the Eurocentrism of earlier longstanding arguments that saw fashion as unique to Europe and European-descended cultures. These earlier arguments were founded on particular models of mercantile capitalism, modern identity formation and displays of sexual attraction as providing the essential conditions for fashion, and aligned fashion with the causes and effects of industrial revolution in Europe (Simmel 1904; Bell 1947; Laver 1969; Lipovetsky 1994). As a result, the dress of other parts of the world was seen as static and traditional until westernization created the conditions for industrialization (Braudel 1982: 311–23). Seeing fashion as originating in the West and synonymous with western individualism, sexuality and modernity positioned any other kind of dress as antithetical to western modernity and its corporeal regimes. This did not allow for active appropriation of western styles into East Asian fashion as anything other than a wholesale adoption: only one kind of fashion subjectivity was allowed, and this was either a western or a westernized subjectivity.

The position of East Asian fashion within western writing on modernity and cultural identity is certainly revealing. The Viennese modernist Adolf Loos, for example, referenced China a surprising number of times in his writings on early-twentieth-century European taste and design (Loos 1998: 39, 52, 67, 82, 84, 93, 110, 160, 190). In every case, Chinese clothing stood for a rational, civilized and utterly foreign contrast that stood apart from the vagaries of European fashion due to the (false) perception that it did not change over time. Bernard Rudofsky (1965), in his mid-twentieth-century study of Japanese modernity, calls wearing a kimono and carrying a handbag an anachronism, reflecting the idea that kimonos and western fashion belong to different moments in time. He implies that there can be no modern

kimono and he dubs fashionable Japanese hairstyles ‘the acme of disorientalization’ (Rudofsky 1965: 37). Korean fashion, it should be noted, has been largely absent from the discussion, having only recently come to international attention with the rise of K-pop and new freedom of movement and self-expression for South Koreans since the 1980s.

Even in more recent anglophone studies that seek to challenge the notion of fashion as a purely western phenomenon, East Asian cultures still prove problematic. In his comparative study of pre-modern Europe, Japan, China and India, Carlo Marco Belfanti concludes that fashion was not a European invention, given the degree to which an ‘increasing passion for change and the insatiable search for novelty’ was expressed by the Asian cultures under investigation (2008: 442). However, he argues that fashion in Japan, China and India was only partially expressed, and he attributes the ‘limiting of fashion in Asia’ (Belfanti 2008) to a lack of dramatic change in silhouette, an underdeveloped fashion system and the primary identification of fashion with luxury. He goes on to state that ‘[i]n the nineteenth century, there was no other fashion than that established in Western society, which was then imposed on the rest of the world, relegating the other clothing traditions to particular niches’ (Belfanti 2008: 442–43).

A number of recent publications in the English language notably explore the kimono as a fashionable rather than timeless garment, and successfully challenge the suppositions of Belfanti (Okazaki 2015; Franks 2015; Milhaupt 2015; Jackson 2015; Cliffe 2017). For example, Milhaupt (2015) demonstrates a sophisticated kimono fashion system in operation since the seventeenth century by tracing networks of production and exchange between designers, makers, promoters and consumers of kimono in relation to their social, political, economic and cultural contexts. The above

authors give multiple examples of the ways in which new fabrics, dyes, exotic motifs and technological innovations were incorporated into kimono design and opened up new clothing possibilities for the non-elite. Similarly, studies of Chinese dress history show that fashion is there if you know how to look for it – from **the Tang dynasty (618–907) women of cosmopolitan Chang’an, whose dress incorporated Persian motifs and Turkish influences such as shoes with turned-up toes, to the placement of pockets and the layering of shirts during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) (Cahill 1999; Finnane 2008; Wilson 1999)**. Antonia Finnane in particular has shown that a dynamic range of rapid stylistic and material changes existed in Chinese dress prior to the opening up of China to the West in the later nineteenth century, arguing that these should be recognized as self-conscious fashion changes (Finnane 2008:1–67).

Stylistic and material changes may have appeared too subtle to qualify as fashion for those unacquainted with East Asian cultures, but change occurred nonetheless; for example, the development of *hōmongi* (‘visiting wear’) in the 1890s, which originally filled the gulf between everyday and formal kimono wear, was popularized by department stores such as Mitsukoshi in the early twentieth century (Jackson 2015: 117; Cliffe 2017: 45). Interviews with kimono wearers today – both Japanese *and* non-Japanese – offer a window into the lived experience of the garment and how it is used to express individuality in a diverse range of consumption practices (Cliffe 2017: 157–97). In China, a new generation are now investing in *hanfu*, a style of dressing that looks to pre-Qing dynasty (1644–1911) dress for inspiration but can hardly be called a static tradition, while young Korean designers are creating *sheang hwal hanbok*, a new type of ‘lifestyle’ traditional dress, where the word ‘lifestyle’ encodes a complex set of ideas and values relating to a Korean sense of modernity. To

successfully interpret East Asian fashion, it is therefore important to see and work with transformation, translation and hybridity rather than ideas of exotic difference.

Fashion and translation: East Asian perspectives

Postcolonial and postmodern studies have drawn attention to mutability and interstitial fluidity in material culture as a cultural location for the marginalized to find a voice. The exploration of concepts such as transculturation, creolization and the cosmopolitan have enabled recognition and celebration of the ‘problem’ of the hybrid by providing a means of speaking about our globally intertwined world (Ortiz 1947; Hannerz 1996). By exploring Euro-American and East Asian interactions, and allowing the interstitial and hybrid to remain unfixed within the construction of national identities, a fuller exploration of the development and transmission of fashion styles may be achieved (Cheang forthcoming 2018). This is clearly a discussion that needs to go beyond the West and its Others, engaging both centre and periphery as sites of transformation, and attending to the power structures between and within societies and within academic debate (Coombes 1994: 221; Wang 2004; Teasley et al. 2011; Lionnet and Shih 2005).

To better reflect the contemporary globalized fashion industry, five out of the six articles in this issue are written from the perspective of East Asia, and draw heavily on East Asian scholarship and primary material. Sources not usually accessible to non-Japanese, non-Korean and non-Chinese speakers are explored here, while the sixth article reveals an experience of working in Japanese fashion journalism without any knowledge of the Japanese language. Taking translation as a key cultural dynamic, the authors offer new readings of fashion as a multilayered vehicle for individuality, cosmopolitanism, diplomacy, ethnicity and global networks

of money, goods and ideas. They emphasize the inter- and intracultural dynamics of translation, as well as analyse how the processes of interpretation, transfer, imitation, transformation and exchange relate to cultural distinctiveness.

Contemporary transnational fashion interactions are deeply rooted in a longer story of fashion exchange within East Asia and between East Asia and the wider world, and this needs to be revisited and critically expanded upon. The second half of the nineteenth century was an important period of ‘opening up’ for Japan, China and Korea, giving direct access between East Asian and European cultures. From the 1860s, Japanese urbanites conspicuously accessorized with western-style boots, bowler hats and pocket watches, while British consumers began donning kimono dressing gowns in their homes. Akiko Savas’s article for this issue demonstrates how fashion can serve as an economic strategy in her examination of the significance that kimonos had in British fashion at the beginning of the twentieth century, a time when large numbers of kimonos were specially designed in Japan for the export market. Savas demonstrates the ways in which Japanese manufacturers and retailers, such as Takashimaya, ‘translated’ kimono design in both form and colour to suit the very different cultural language of British society.

In the colonial period in Korea (1910–45), Japanese rule deeply affected Korean culture, with pressure to alter many social systems, and even people’s names, along Japanese lines. While early-twentieth-century modernity and westernization involved direct engagements and the threat or reality of armed conflicts with Europe and America, in the cases of Japan and China, modernization in Korea was intimately tied in with Japanese rule and intra-Asian fashion exchange. Jungtaek Lee’s article is a close investigation of Korean sartorial practice in the early twentieth century that challenges the conventional view of modern Korean fashion as a linear progression

from *hanbok* (Korean dress) to *yangbok* (western dress). Instead he demonstrates how Korean dress and fashion in the modern and colonial period emerged through *yangbok* and *hanbok* simultaneously, looking at the ways in which these two dress systems developed in relation to the vernacular Korean context as well as across colonial Japanese and western fashion discourse. While Korean fashion history may be under-explored and somewhat unfamiliar in anglophone literature, Lee's analysis of fashion production, mediation and consumption in Korea between the 1880s and 1940s demonstrates that fashion has been historically located here too.

Late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century 'modern women', the wearers of new transcultural styles, emerge as important agents in the mixing of East Asian and western fashion in the narratives provided by Savas, Jungtaek Lee and also Yu Liu. Both Jungtaek Lee and Liu's articles examine the fashionability of East Asian clothing through meticulous object-based research; for example, the *hanbok* collection loaned by Daejeon Saint Mary's Girls' High School to Sungkyunkwan University and the *qipao* collection of the Shanghai Museum of Textile and Costume. These bring to our attention new and compelling visual and object-based evidence that enables comparisons to be made between *hanbok* and *qipao* as transnational garments and transnational vehicles for East Asian modernities. Their work also draws to our attention the importance of bringing historical collections in East Asia to wider international attention.

Dress fashions constantly mediate between past and present, producing a powerful sense of a person's place within constructions of modernity. Concepts of fashion formed in dialectical relationship to ideas of the old and the unchanging have engaged with East Asian traditional dress in ways that challenge Eurocentric models of modernity. The articles by Liu and Christine Tsui engage with the multiple actors

involved in the creation of Chinese fashion, which are addressed head-on rather than skipped over as inconvenient complications. Tsui's article closely examines the ways in which Shanghai's tailoring and fashion businesses developed in the first half of the twentieth century and were then transformed after 1949 under Chinese communism.

The survival of fashion in Maoist China, when changes in political ideology affected the use of the term 'fashion' as well as the ways in which fashion businesses could operate in the new socialist China, is revealed through a close study of the Hong Xiang fashion firm.

The complex role of fashion within formations of nationhood and modernity, debated across all of the abovementioned articles, is further examined by Yunah Lee, who considers how Korean traditions has been aligned by designers with international fashion trends. Offering significant critical insights into contemporary fashion exchange and the production of national identities, Yunah Lee reconsiders the debate of 'self-orientalization' in Asian fashion within the context of contemporary Korean fashion and the promotion of the national economy and culture through distinctive Korean images. Through case studies of the Tchae Kim and Isae labels, she examines how Korean designers have challenged traditional connotations around *hanbok*, producing styles that resonate with local as well as global consumers, in which traditional making skills add both cultural and monetary value to their products.

The final article deals with the 'untranslatable' and the impact of what is transformed, gained or lost in the process of translation. Catherine Glover analyses her professional experience from 2005 to 2012, when she reported on London fashion developments for Shiseido's magazine *Hanatsubaki*. Her examination of the ways in which the latest British trends were interpreted and transmitted between diverse cultures demonstrates in fashion journalism what Codell has argued for transcultural art: 'The space of transcultural art is not Euclidean, but interstitial – between cultures,

experience and imagination, memory and loss, desire and anxiety, and dream and reality' (Codell 2012: 9).

Decentring Euro-American fashion cultures by focusing on East Asia, thinking of fashion as a process of translation, and paying attention to the materiality of fashion as well as the multiple cultural fields within which fashion operates, have been key approaches for the 'Fashion and Translation' network project. Along the way, this special issue creates a dialogue across disciplines and cultures to provide fresh perspectives for anglophone fashion scholarship on East Asian fashion.

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Note

¹ The geographical parameters of this network project were chosen to allow for a manageable exploration of how fashion works in cultural translation and to challenge Eurocentrism in fashion scholarship. Across three workshops and four fashion-collection visits in the United Kingdom and Japan, network members explored the historical roots and contemporary aspects of East Asian fashion in order to create a new understanding of East Asian fashion's intra- and extra-regional movements. Events included 'Workshop 1: Fashion and Translation', Royal College of Art, London and a collection visit to the Clothworkers' Centre for the Study and Conservation of Textiles and Fashion, Victoria & Albert Museum, London (16–17 April 2014); 'Workshop 2: Branding and Marketing Transnational Fashion', Northumbria University, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and a collection visit to the Discovery Museum, Newcastle-upon-Tyne (3–4 July 2014); and 'Workshop 3: Fashion and Translation: Britain, Japan, China, Korea', held in partnership with the Transboundary Fashion Research Project, Bunka Gakuen University, Tokyo, and a collection visit to the Bunka Gakuen Costume Museum, Tokyo (14–15 February 2015) and the Kyoto Costume Institute (18 February 2015).